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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

AMERICAN VALUES VERSUS LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT

An Individual Study Project
Intended for Publication

by

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30 March 1988

ABSTRACT

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America is confronted internationally by two sources of threats to her vital interests. One source is the Soviet Union and the other is non-Soviet regimes. To counter these threats an aggressive, interventionist foreign policy is often necessary. If the Soviet Union is the opponent, such a foreign policy is more easily justified and more generally supported by the American people than in the non-Soviet case. In a non-Soviet case, the Sandanista regime in Nicaragua, the Reagan administration has been unable to achieve majority popular support for the pro-insurgency, low intensity conflict which it has been waging there. A conflict with traditional American values is the primary reason for this failure. Examining the historical reasons for this clash including U.S. involvement in Nicaraguan affairs since 1850, the lingering effects of the "Vietnam syndrome " and the Administration's overreliance on the military instrument of power, this paper analyzes the problem and makes recommendations for its solution.

INTRODUCTION

The President of the United States has the responsibility for safeguarding the nation's vital interests. He has considerable assistance in discharging this responsibility to include various agencies which assist him in identifying threats to U.S. interests. Consideration of national goals, national vital interests, and threats to those interests results in a foreign policy. Challenges to that policy result from partisan political viewpoints, a legitimate difference of opinion regarding any element of the equation which led to the policy and American values.

Despite recent substantive moves toward lessening the tensions between the US and USSR, the threat of communist subversion in Central America continues. Castro's Cuba marches on with the aid of heavy economic subsidy from the Soviet Union. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas continue to consolidate their power despite a seriously ailing economy aggravated by the U.S. supported Contra insurgency. The Cuban and Nicaraguan situations are of such serious concern to some Americans that they warn of a Central American "domino theory" with communist guerillas eventually spilling over the Rio Grande. During the Vietnam war,the "domino theory" was frequently ridiculed. Today given the geographic, political and economic situations in Central America and Mexico, that prognosis is arguably less far-fetched.

Facing such a situation the American people should be

clamoring for direct action. The fact that the majority are not raises the question: "why not?"

When analyzing threats to U.S. vital security interests it is relatively easy to achieve consensus when the Soviet Union itself is the opponent. The threat to Western European security posed by the proximity of massive Soviet forces and the presence of Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba are two examples of clear threats to U.S. vital interests.

Threats posed by Soviet surrogates, to include avowed Marxist regimes, are harder to sell to Congress and the American people. Being harder to sell, it is harder to produce the consensus necessary to support an aggressive foreign policy and thus, to counter the threat posed by regimes such as the Sandanistas in Nicaragua. In the Winter 1986/87 issue of Foreign Affairs, Joshua Muravchik described the challenge in an article entitled "The Nicaraguan Debate":

> The same electorate that invariably tells pollsters that it favors increases in government services and deceases in taxation now was telling them that it was anxious to stop communism in our hemisphere but reluctant to go to much trouble or accept many risks in order to do so.[1]

This comment was in response to an April 1986 CBS/New York Times poll showing a 2-1 majority opposed to aid to the Contras but a 5-3 majority stating that "it is important to the security of the United States to eliminate communism from Latin America."[2]

Foreign policy involving the use of force by the U.S military or by U.S. surrogates receives particularly critical attention. This fact, in part, explains the apparent paradox evident in the quoted CBS/New York Times poll results. Again, where the

Soviets themselves are involved, as in Afghanistan, there is less controversy. In a February 1988 article in the Harrisburg Patriot entitled "Afghan rebel support pays off for Reagan" the author noted an "ironic twist" --that apparent success in pro-insurgency was first achieved by the President "on the other side of the globe" and not "in his own backyard, in Nicaragua, where the White House insists the security of the U.S. itself is at stake."[3]

If one accepts the theory that threats to U.S. interests in the future will more likely be posed by Soviet surrogates and other so called Third World nations, then how will we effectively function in the area of foreign policy? This paper will analyze the current Nicaraguan situation as a vehicle to better understand the nature of the problem and, on the basis of that understanding, make recommendations towards its solution.

The Nicaraguan example evokes little pride in the history of the U.S.'s involvement in that country since 1850 - a clear lesson in political, military and economic exploitation. From the signing of the Clayton-Bulwer treaty in 1850 to the adventures of William Walker and the 1909 Marine invasion of Nicaragua, the U.S. has meddled in Nicaraguan affairs for the purposes of economic gain and in the name of stability. Following yet another U.S. Marine peacekeeping incursion in 1912, the United States maintained troops in Nicaragua "with the exception of a brief nine-month period in 1925-26" until 1933.[4] On the diplomatic front, the 1916 Bryan-Chamorro treaty "helped transform Nicaragua into a virtual protectorate of the United States."[5]

The 1927 Pact of Espino Negro which established the Guardia Nacional was opposed by Augusto Cesar Sandino who lead a continuing insurgency against the forces of "American imperialism."[6] For six years Sandino fought the U.S. Marines and the Guard. The Marines finally left Nicaragua in January 1933 and in February of that year, Sandino accepted a cease fire. His terms among others were: "an end to U.S management of the National Guard, the calling of a Pan-American conference to revoke the Chamorro-Bryan canal treaty, an end to political and economic dependency of Nicaragua on the United States, redistribution of land to the peasantry..."[7] Sandino was later murdered by the Guard acting under the orders of its chief, Anastasio Somoza Garcia.

Somoza continued to court the United States while he enriched himself and his family at the expense of the Nicaraguan

people. Assassinated in 1956, Somoza was succeeded by his eldest son, Luis Somoza Debayle. In 1967, following Luis Somoza's death, Anastasio Somoza took charge. Repressive, dictatorial and corrupt, he was finally driven from power in 1979 by the victory of the Sandanista revolution. A 1982 U.S. Army area study noted: "the struggle against Somoza was not strictly a class-based revolution; virtually all sectors of Nicaraguan society had joined in the effort to oust the dictator."[8]

This brief historical review highlights the reason why many Americans,right from the outset, harbor a guilty conscience about the way our democracy has conducted its Nicaraguan foreign affairs. Yet should a guilty conscience over past deeds preclude effective action today? In an address by George Shultz before the National Committee on American Foreign Policy in 1985, the U.S. Secretary of State said: "...we Americans have had to accept that our passionate commitment to moral principles could be no substitute for a sound foreign policy in a world of hard realities and complex choices."[9] And again in the same speech: " We have friends and allies who do not always live up to our standards of freedom and democratic government yet we cannot abandon them. Our adversaries are the worst offenders of the principles we cherish."[10]

Another slant on this issue is author Shirley Christian's description of the pitfalls of too much morality in foreign policy. She argues that the Carter administration's vacillation helped bring the Sandanistas to power. The President's focus on human rights produced indecision in handling Somoza. "The

Carter administration would neither back Somoza nor tell him to go."[11] As a result, she concludes, a potential moderate alternative government never had a chance to come to power and prove itself.

Yet all that is history. What about the Sandanista regime, which came to power following the ouster of Somoza? How has the U.S. handled it?

Following the Sandanista takeover, the Carter Administration attempted to forge relations with the new government in Nicaragua. The Sandanistas needed both economic and military assistance and looked to the U.S. to provide it. Economic help was forthcoming. The new Nicaraguan government took a number of actions which unsettled first a morally conscious and then (with the Reagan ascendancy) a politically conservative Washington. Early visitors to the new regime included the PLO and radical Arab groups. Concern arose about Nicaragua's willingness to export its revolution to other Central America states specifically to El Salvador. In 1980 Humberto Ortega announced the postponing of elections until 1985. If elections were held sooner, the "exploiters and oppressors" might use them to return to power, he explained.[12] Ortega said: "keep in mind that (ours) are elections to advance revolutionary power, not to raffle off power, because the people (already) have power through their vanguard, the Sandanista Front of National Liberation..."[13] The Vanguard, nine commandantes, "were the new elite, an elite based not on land and money and guns, but on ideological formation, party discipline and guns."[14] The Sandanistas quickly embraced

the Cubans and Soviets while continuing to build their military force both in numbers of personnel and in types of equipment to include tanks.

Following two years of U.S. support, economic aid to Nicaragua was suspended in late February 1981 following revelations that Nicaragua had been a clearing house for arms shipments to the communist rebels in El Salvador. Months later U.S. intelligence reported that the Sandanistas and Salvadoran guerillas were still cooperating. In fact, Managua was the headquarters of the Salvadoran guerilla High Command.[15]

In 1984 Daniel Ortega became president of Nicaragua. Cubans in significant numbers now were in the country along with lesser numbers of Soviet, Libyan and Eastern European military advisers. Ostensibly present to assist in Nicaraguan self defense against the U.S. backed Contra insurgents and a potential U.S. invasion, these military advisers added to the weight of the large, ever increasing, Nicaraguan military force. Ortega undertook a personal lobbying effort within the U.S. to influence American public opinion against the Reagan administration's Nicaraguan policy and particularly his support for the Contras. The result of this public relations campaign was seesaw Congressional action cutting off, then restoring Contra aid. When Congressional action in 1985 restored only "humanitarian" aid, Ortega flew off to Moscow the next day to solicit increased Soviet assistance. Annual Soviet aid to Nicaragua has increased from 340 million dollars in 1982 to over one billion dollars in 1987. [16]

There is no doubt that on the basis of the foregoing an argument can be made that the Sandanista regime in Nicaragua constitutes a threat to non-communist governments in the Central American region and ultimately to U.S. security. Maintaining this viewpoint the Reagan administration has involved this country,since as early as March 1981,in a pro-insurgent, low intensity conflict (LIC) whose goal is the ouster of the Sandanistas. First, what is LIC?

In 1985 the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the following definition of low intensity conflict :

> Low intensity conflict is a limited politico-military struggle to achieve political, social, economic, or psychological objectives. It is often protracted and ranges from diplomatic, economic, and psychosocial pressures through terrorism and insurgency. Low intensity conflict is generally confined to a geographic area and is often characterized by constraints on the weaponry, tactics, and the level of violence.[17]

In Volume 1 of its Analytical Review of Low Intensity Conflict, U.S. Army TRADOC takes the JCS definition of LIC and further divides the subject into four major categories: insurgency/counterinsurgency, terrorism counteraction, peacetime contingency, and peacekeeping operations.[18]

Despite these definitions a good deal of confusion exists, particularly in military circles, as to the meaning of LIC. In its military context, some feel that LIC means U.S. conventional forces fighting an insurgent guerilla force. Others think that the use of conventional forces by any party in the dispute raises the conflict to mid-intensity level. Others view LIC as war on the cheap--cheap in risk, treasure and commitment. And still

others are suspicious of any concept of a "cheap" war. What is crucial for the politician, the soldier and the citizen to remember is that LIC involves all the instruments of national power to include political, economic and psychosocial pressures not just military force.

As previously stated the Reagan administration considered supporting the anti-Sandanista insurgents as early as March 1981. The military aspect of this support began with the signing of National Security Decision Directive No. 17 in November 1981, authorizing funds for use by the CIA in raising a paramilitary force to conduct attacks within Nicaragua.[19] Sensitive to the fact that numbers of the new "Contra" force were former members of the hated Somoza National Guard, the CIA went out of its way to recruit at least some Contra leaders whose reputations were decidedly anti-Somoza. Media reporting of contents of the CIA Psychological Operations in Guerilla Warfare training manual given to the Contras highlighted such paragraphs as :

> It is possible to neutralize carefully selected targets, such as court judges, magistrates, police and state security officials etc. For psychological purposes, it is necessary to gather together the population affected, so that they will be present, take part in the act, and formulate accusations against the oppressor.[20]

The CIA supervised a flurry of attacks on Nicaragua for a six month period in late 1983 and early 1984. Targets included oil facilities, ports, communications centers and the Nicaraguan military. The public disclosure of minelaying operations in Nicaraguan harbors led to a Congressional cutoff of Contra aid in October 1984.[21] The covert Contra aid program, described during

the Iran-Contra hearings, kept the "freedom fighters" alive and in the field until Congress renewed aid in mid-1986.

U.S. military exercises around Nicaragua were also conducted to demonstrate U.S. muscle and to keep the Sandanistas off balance as to U.S. intentions. "Big Pine" exercises in Honduras coupled with assorted large scale, joint land and sea military maneuvers served to remind Nicaragua of U.S. military capabilities and to reassure our allies in the region. In a "classified" report to Congress in April 1985 President Reagan indicated the possibility of a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua. "Such a military gambit, the report stated, must realistically be recognized as an eventual option in the region if other policy alternatives fail."[22]

On the economic front the Reagan administration sought to discredit the Sandanistas in the eyes of their own people by upsetting the fragile Nicaraguan economy. The first target was U.S./Nicaraguan trade. The U.S. Government ended Export-Import Bank guarantees and imposed trade restrictions involving the sale of Nicaraguan sugar in America. Finally, on May 1, 1985, the Administration instituted a total embargo of all imports from and exports to Nicaragua.

In the area of international politics the U.S. generally failed to persuade its allies to assume a similar stance vis-a-relations with the Sandanistas. Washington did manage to influence both the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank to curtail support to Nicaragua.

Preoccupied with the removal of the Sandanistas from power, the Reagan administration was caught off guard by the peace plan hammered out by the five Central American presidents in Guatemala City in August 1987. Washington had its own plan aimed as much (if not more) at gaining leverage over the Sandanistas as toward achieving peace in the region. The homegrown Central American peace plan, named for its sponsor Oscar Arias Sanchez of Costa Rica, called for the immediate cessation of Contra funding and an end to the use of Honduran sanctuaries by Contra fighters. Cease fires in the region's civil wars were to be implemented as soon as possible with subsequent elections leading to eventual democratization. In October of last year Arias was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize further underscoring his efforts in the eyes of the world community. The Sandanistas signalled their willingness to pursue the peace process by freeing some political prisoners and by allowing the opposition press to reopen. Referring to the Central American peace plan Time magazine noted last October "... most Central Americans agree that more progress has been made toward peace in the past two months than in the past six years..."[23]

This paper began by arguing the impact of American values on foreign policy and on our willingness to intervene in the affairs of other nations. Outside observers have looked at the United States and been impressed that with all our power, we are hesitant to use it. Intervention in the affairs of sovereign nations and the employment of force by the U.S. evokes moralism

and requires an excruciatingly detailed rationale for such action. The containment of communism which, pre-Vietnam, seemed sufficient justification for U.S. intervention, has, since 1975, lost weight in the minds of the majority of the American people. Cynics might say that communism has become no less anathema; it is a Vietnam induced fear of losing which has caused the current mindset. Others have argued that it is not our job to free others from communist domination, that is their problem.

There is no doubt that the "Vietnam syndrome" is alive decades after the fact. It can be argued that fear of U.S. sons becoming involved in a war in Nicaragua is more terrifying to American citizens than the moral dilemmas of proxy war. Yet paradoxically the failure of this LIC may lead to the commitment of American military forces. Should U.S. forces invade they would beat the Sandanistas in a conventional, mid-intensity fight. But there are indications that the Sandanistas would head for the hills as Sandino did decades before. In August 1983 Steven Kinzer wrote in the New York Times Magazine:

> ...the Sandanistas are already preparing for this eventuality by hiding stores of weapons, ammunition and fuel at clandestine depots around the country. An American military victory would have to be followed by a protracted occupation marked by intense guerilla warfare and heavy American casualties.[24]

The "Vietnam syndrome" is also alive and well in the minds of U.S. military men. Former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's six major tests for the employment of U.S. combat forces abroad include the requirement for "the support of the American people and Congress." Though crucial in the long run,

adherence to this requirement before the fact would limit the President's options in reacting to unexpected contingencies. Also, fighting guerillas is a tough business quite apart from the issue of popular support. The U.S. Army's new Joint Readiness Training Center, though advertising training in both low and mid intensity conflict, does not attempt to address guerilla warfare due to its complexity.

The bully issue also affects the public viewpoint of the Nicaraguan situation. To gain support for the use of force, the non-Soviet opponent must be perceived as clearly posing a threat to the security of the United States. Despite the credible scenarios which can be drawn projecting that future threat, it is hard to convince the average American that "little Nicaragua" or the Sandanistas are seriously worth worrying about now. The problem here is not only a lack of vision but also the underestimation of the appeal of the Marxist revolutionary's siren song to the region's poor.

With these realizations in mind, low intensity conflict in its pro-insurgency form is apparently tailor made for popular consumption. The effort in support of the Nicaraguan Contras costs money but not U.S. lives. The Contra force is composed of Nicaraguans fighting for their own country in the name of democratic reform. If the Contras lose then <u>they</u>, not U.S. Forces, have failed in the field. The JCS definition of LIC clearly describes the "often protracted" nature of such conflict up front. Thus even the characteristic U.S. impatience with drawn out struggles should not be a negative factor. We can always

console ourselves that if we were doing the fighting, the troops would be home for Christmas.

So why then the problem with this LIC? Why has Contra aid been such a controversial issue? Why the recent House defeat for continued Contra funding? Though not specifically a values issue the partisan political nature of the Contra aid issue should not be overlooked. The Iran-Contra drama, though posing some serious questions about the mechanics of decision making and policy execution in the Executive Branch, was a timely "scandal" for the opposition. Facing a Presidential election, the opportunity to tarnish the reputation of a popular President, and thereby the Republican party, was almost too good to ignore. From a theoretical viewpoint it is unfortunate that partisan politics is a factor in evaluating the Nicaraguan LIC because it makes it impossible to determine how many Democrats really feel that this particular pro-insurgency is a good idea. Realistically, partisan politics will always play some part in shaping opinions on such a controversial subject.

Politics aside, there are other powerful reasons for the apparent unpopularity of the Contra pro-insurgency. Perhaps because the government has been so quick to link the Soviet Union with the actions of its surrogates, our attempt at proxy war is tainted by association. Despite the fact that U.S. boys are not dying and the Contras are using mostly Soviet equipment, the Contra war is still viewed as a U.S. war and is therefore subject to the same expectations and values. The "messy" aspects of

insurgency are unsettling to educated America. Yet as Dr. Sam Sarkesian states:

> National leaders and the public must understand that low intensity conflicts do not conform to democratic notions of strategy or tactics. Revolution and counterrevolution develop their own morality and ethic that justify any means to achieve success. Survival is the ultimate reality.[25]

The Administration's policy has also appeared singularly linked to the military instrument of power--the Contras. Other instruments of power have greater popular appeal and are less worrisome than the use of force. This fact certainly explains the popular reception of the Arias peace plan as a potential political solution to the Nicaraguan situation. America's checkered history in our dealings with Nicaragua--as meddlesome big brother or greedy uncle--seems to argue for a wholly local initiative toward promoting peace and democracy. Yet these viewpoints ignore the necessary synergism which results from the simultaneous application of all the power instruments, including force. Truly "giving peace a chance" means the willingness to negotiate in good faith while keeping the economic, psychosocial and, yes, military pressure on. Failure to use "the whole bag" will only drag out the conflict and diminish the chances for its successful termination.

Finally, the secrecy which has attended the Nicaraguan LIC has seemed, when breached, to be both an embarrassment and setback to the Reagan administration. In its May 25, 1987 issue Time magazine addressed the ethics/values issue in a cover story entitled: "What Ever Happened to Ethics:assaulted by sleaze, scandals and hypocrisy, America searches for its moral bearings."

A synopsis of the centerpiece editorial is the argument that American morality and values are in disarray. Focusing on the White House, the article takes the President to task for his lack of moral leadership as evidenced in the Iran-Contra affair. The American people feel betrayed by a leadership which does not keep them informed. This sense of mistrust and betrayal further diminishes the possibility of building support.[26] Yet is there an alternative to secrecy when the people will not recognize a threat to their security?

Secrecy in a democracy seems to many to be a contradiction in terms. But secrecy is a useful and necessary tool in dealing with threats to our society. Yet, argues Gregory Treverton in an article in Foreign Affairs, covert operations should be left to the experts--the CIA--and not run from the White House. They(the CIA) have "the expertise and the accountability."[27] If the President's advisers become involved in conducting covert operations then "the President loses them as sources of detached judgment on the operations. The President's own circle become advocates..."[28]

In summary the Vietnam hangover poses a powerful challenge to an interventionist foreign policy. The memory is still too painful to ignore. That pain can be productive when it reminds us that our national power does have its limits and that the lives of our sons are too important to spend on crusades. That pain however can be destructive when it blinds us to real threats and saps our resolve to pay the price to maintain our national security. The public remains ignorant as to the

severity of the Sandanista threat and, if concerned at all, is far more comfortable debating policy in Nicaragua than dealing with it. To build its proficiency and self confidence the U.S. military should be training itself to counter insurgencies on the battlefield while effectively assisting the host government to win "the hearts and minds of its people." Strategist Harry Summers argued recently in an Army Times article that the Contras have failed because:

> America forgot that fundamental of revolutionary warfare when it championed the Contra military resistance to the Sandanistas in Nicaragua without first insisting the rebels lay the essential political and psychological foundations.[29]

To train others in these truths we must first understand them ourselves. Further, a pro-insurgency LIC policy is relatively cheap for the U.S. and therefore a preferred option. But if war by proxy fails, we must be prepared to fight while assisting in nation building if our security is really at stake.

American values will continue to have the greatest impact on popular support for U.S. foreign policy. The American people will always be reluctant to sanction the use of force unless directly threatened. Yet ambiguity will still characterize future, non-Soviet threats to U.S. security and , as a result, we will continue to agonize about the "rightness" of intervention and the "wrongness" of a bully image. Our military and political leadership will continue to be haunted and influenced by the negative lessons of Vietnam. For these reasons informed Americans will not be persuaded by facile "Mom and apple pie" arguments and shallow, anti-communist rhetoric. Rather

to achieve popular support for an interventionist foreign policy, the President and his staff must demonstrate a clear,yet sophisticated vision of the threat and effectively communicate that vision to the Congress and citizenry. Mindful of the values issue, future Administrations must also demonstrate their willingness to use <u>all</u> the instruments of power, including negotiation, in the pursuit of national security, peace and stability.

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